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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001752

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: PREL KDEM PGOV PTER LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PATRIARCH SFEIR OPPOSED TO GIVING NAMES

REF: BEIRUT 1747

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Maronite Patriarch Sfeir told the Ambassador on 11/08 that he is opposed to the French request that he provide a list of five acceptable presidential candidates for Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri to consider. First, he explained, he would offend all other Maronites if he would pick only five. Second, there are no assurances his names would be accepted. Instead, the parliament should have the lead, with parliament electing rather than Hariri and Berri selecting. While insistent that a "half-plus-one" absolute majority election must be avoided to save Lebanon from catastrophe, he did not know how to persuade March 8 MPs to show up to vote without knowing in advance the outcome. In touching on names, he indicated that he prefers someone who has not been actively involved in current politics, mentioning Maronite League chief Joseph Torbey and former Ambassador Simon Karam as the type of president he seeks. The Patriarch suggested that the Ambassador shuttle among leaders to see if there was perhaps overlap on the various lists of presidential candidates. The Ambassador demurred. End summary.

PATRIARCH OPPOSED TO GIVING NAMES

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir one-on-one on 11/8. The Ambassador asked Patriarch Sfeir whether he was, per a French request presented to him by French Charge Andre Parant two days earlier (reftel), willing to provide a short list of perhaps five acceptable names as presidential candidates. Sfeir responded that he was opposed to such an approach and would continue to tell the French that it was "impossible" for him to give names. First, he said, by selecting names, he would divide the Maronite community more deeply than it is now. He was not willing to offend those candidates whose names he would not select. Second, he claimed a "bad experience" with this approach in 1988, when no one on his list was elected. He annoyed his community without any positive results.

PARLIAMENT SHOULD ELECT, RATHER

¶13. (C) Sfeir said that he also did not like the second half of the French proposal, that MP Saad Hariri and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri would together select a winner from Sfeir's list. The parliamentary election would simply confirm the choice. A selection of the president by Hariri and Berri is not consistent with the spirit of the constitution. Instead, parliament should be in the lead. Parliament should be presented with a list, long or short, and then parliament should have a free election. The Ambassador agreed that was ideal, but he noted that Nabih Berri and other March 8-Aoun MPs have threatened to continue to boycott elections unless an acceptable outcome is determined in advance. The Patriarch shrugged, noting that he had been clear that MPs should show up to vote. He rejected the Ambassador's suggestion that he could do more to encourage parliamentary attendance, such as announce that he would go to parliament to witness the vote.

'HALF-PLUS-ONE' ELECTION: CATASTROPHE

¶14. (C) The Ambassador asked Sfeir what, since he disliked the French proposal, he thought the international community should be doing to promote presidential elections in the short time remaining before the midnight 11/23 expiration of EmiQ Lahoud's term. Sfeir suggested encouraging MPs to vote and leaders to come together on a consensus candidate. At all costs, he said, the "half-plus-one" absolute majority vote should be avoided. That approach will lead to conflict, whereas what Lebanon needs now is consensus. Sfeir agreed with the ambassador that the principles protecting Lebanon's sovereignty and independence (UNSCRs, tribunal, Ta'if accord, etc.) cannot be compromised, but the president himself must

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be a compromise and not be elected with resorting to half-plus-one. The Ambassador asked what happens if we find ourselves on 11/24 with no president: would a half-plus-one election be acceptable then? Sfeir said that it was important to find a consensus solution before reaching that situation. It would be a "catastrophe" for Lebanon to face the divisions a half-plus-one election would create.

WANTED: A NON-POLITICIAN PRESIDENT

¶15. (C) The Ambassador referred to the monthly Maronite Bishops' statement the previous day and asked whether the statement (which stated that Lebanese are tired of their politicians, a sentiment we share) suggested that the Church prefers a non-political president. The Patriarch repeated his now standard formula about the president must be experienced, credible, and "equal distance from all" political sides. The Ambassador repeated his usual lines about how March 8 and March 14 do not represent equally valid points of view, as one side is trying to return Syrian hegemony and the other side is suffering casualties in trying to defend Lebanese sovereignty and independence. The Patriarch said that he would like the president to be "someone like" Maronite League chief Joseph Torbey or former Ambassador to the U.S. Simon Karam. In fact, he said, Karam is "excellent." Unfortunately, he lamented, Nabih Berri already passed word that he rejects him.

PATRIARCH MUSES ABOUT USG INVOLVEMENT

¶16. (C) Asked again by the Ambassador what he expects from the international community to help create the atmosphere for presidential elections, Sfeir suggested that the Ambassador shuttle among the major players to gather the names of which candidates are acceptable. Perhaps, he said, there will be overlap among the lists, and the Ambassador would discover

two or three candidates who have broad support whose names could go to parliament. The Ambassador said that we did not want to insert ourselves into the "name game," when the Lebanese themselves would be capable of such shuttling. There is no value added and much risk to us collecting and sharing names. The Ambassador suggested instead that Nabih Berri and Saad Hariri both be asked to produce lists, in consultations with their allies, that could then be presented to the Patriarch. The Patriarch could pick a name or two from each list or any overlapping names to submit to the parliament. The Patriarch was not enthusiastic.

COMMENT

¶7. (S) All his denials notwithstanding, we wonder if the Patriarch will remain out of the "name game" as the clock ticks toward midnight on 11/23. If he sees that the March 14 majority is serious about going for an absolute majority election as soon as Lahoud's term expires, then he might try to avert what he believes is an unacceptable and dangerous option by at last caving in and giving names. And then the question is what kind of names would he give. While he can barely mask his distrust of Saad Hariri, the Patriarch's thinking in fact has considerable overlap with Hariri's: both want to avoid the absolute majority election and both seem to think that colorless candidates like Joseph Torbey might be the answer to Lebanon's presidential dilemma (even though such a choice would not make the cabinet formation process any easier to accomplish successfully). We may be heading toward a truly weird situation where the Patriarch stands with Hariri against the major Maronite figures like Michel Aoun, Samir Geagea, and all the Qornet Shehwan members whose opposition to Syria the Patriarch quietly supported for years.

FELTMAN